Ten Tips and Tricks for the Online Student
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In the summer of 2000 I began an online Masters program at the
University of Phoenix. I wasn't expecting too many bumps in the online
road. After all, I regularly spent time on the Internet; I used chat
programs and newsgroups and my job title, District Instructional
Technology Coordinator, had me firmly entrenched in all that was new
and cutting edge. Or so I thought.

At the end of my first week "in school" I was panicked, confused and
overwhelmed. It quickly became apparent that this virtual schooling
was not going to be easy. To my colleagues, I am known as one of the
most methodical individuals in my school district, yet in the online
classroom I was disorganized.

During the first course, I had printed every article, Email, group
project, student-to-facilitator communication, lecture, and assignment.
I struggled to work within a synchronous and asynchronous
environment, while juggling my teammate's schedules, multiple
assignments, and my day-to-day job. Finally, after the first course, I
realized I had to make some changes. Otherwise, I would never make
it through the full 20 months of the program. Through that initial
baptism by fire, I quickly developed a set of tips that my fellow
classmates and I found useful.

1) **Read everything twice. Read everything twice.**
   Although this seems self-evident, it's very easy for a student in
   an online environment — pressed for time and anxious to
   complete homework — to scan through postings, lectures and
   assignments without really reading or, consequently, retaining
   anything. Perhaps because the online medium is relatively new,
   most people haven't trained themselves mentally to retain what
   they read onscreen as much as they do with printed material. By
   reading each posting twice, a student has a better chance of
   understanding the true message being communicated.

2) Wait... to reply.

An immediate response to a posting or message that a student finds upsetting or challenging can often result in a war of words rather than thoughtful discussion or meaningful discourse. Without being able to see the sender's facial expressions or hear his or her voice, the context of the message may be lost. You may send something thinking your words are humorous or satirically funny, but others may misinterpret them. Take the equivalent of a "Count to 10 and breathe" break before hitting the Reply button.

3) Reference it. Perhaps Print it.

The temptation in an online classroom is to print everything you're assigned to read, from Emails and postings to websites and lectures. Only print reading assignments that are to be referenced later or if the assignment is somewhat lengthy. However, if you're "paper-trained" then you may need to have the tactile sensation of holding what you read in your hands, so feel free to print your reading assignments. As time went on, I retained more of what I read online and, by the end of the program, I rarely printed anything.

4) Talking in class.

One of the drawbacks of an asynchronous online classroom is that discussion with your facilitator and classmates is hindered by relying only on Email and newsgroup postings. Using instant messaging programs, such as AOL Instant Messenger or Yahoo Messenger, can bring spontaneity of real-world conversation to you and your fellow online colleagues. The use of this technology is, of course, dependent on the school, program or facilitator. If you are allowed to use chat software, it's important to keep a log of your conversations for posting to your classroom. For example, when my teammates and I chatted about projects, we copied our conversation to the class folder. This allowed the facilitator, other students, and absent team members to follow our train of thought as we developed our ideas and processes.

5) A place for everything and everything in its place.

In an online course, information comes at you fast and furious and, before you realize it, you're buried under a deluge of data and piles of printouts. Organize both your printed and computer files the same way. The naming structure you have on your hard drive should mirror what you have in the real-world. For example, in my Curriculum Design & Development course, I named my computer folder for this class as "CURRDD". In it, this folder contained six folders labeled "Week 1", "Week 2" and so on. For my printed materials, I labeled my binder "CURRDD" and the tabbed sections within reflected the "Week

1", "Week 2" online naming structure. This method of organizing my coursework saved me time, eased my frustration and helped me focus more on the course.

6) Getting personal.
Title the subject line of postings with personal and requirement data. Simply put, make it easy for the facilitator to know who sent the posting and why. Is it an assignment, a comment, a question to the facilitator? In my program, the students were required to respond with substantial postings on at least five different days of the week to receive discussion credit. For example, on my first response for Day 1, I labeled the subject line as "DQ 1, Day 1 of 5" so the facilitator could easily see the posting was my initial response to discussion question 1. Above all, use your subject lines for quick identification by others of your postings.

7) Make your message meaningful.
When threaded discussions grow in length, the temptation is to respond with cursory comments such as, "I agree," or "That's true." These comments add little to the dialogue. Rather than use these types of responses, make an effort to include more details, rationale, and opinion. Cite the specific portion of the discussion to which you are referring. This enables those in your class to follow the conversation's path, and contributes to a more intelligent discourse. Otherwise, postings have little meaning, and the students and facilitator have to "hunt" around for shifts in discussion topics.

8) Better safe than sorry.
For complete and accurate documentation, anytime you send an Email or posting, send a copy to yourself. This provides proof that the Email is delivered through the school's system, and shows when the Email was sent. This is critical for assignments due by a certain time. Send a copy of important messages to yourself at an alternate Email address (such as a Hotmail or Yahoo account) to ensure that you have a complete set of records in case something happens to the program server or network. If you have all of your information stored in a separate account, you can continue working without interruption. In the event that a facilitator or classmate fails to do their part, or worse, claims that you didn't do yours, sending a copy to someone at a higher level may help resolve any problems or disputes. Use Email options such as delivery and read receipts to help in the documentation process. One option you might have in obtaining documentation of Emails and postings is with your school's technical department. Most

likely, they should be able to provide back up documentation for all Emails and postings sent through their system.

9) Be your own guide.
Just as students need to get accustomed to learning in an online environment, facilitators have to learn how to teach in one. Many are excellent guides. However, some have not adapted to this new "classroom" as easily. If your facilitator does not seem to be an effective classroom leader, you can help by communicating clearly and effectively with him. Keep Emails to one question or one topic; multiple questions in a message may be overlooked in a response. Make use of all methods of communication provided by the facilitator: such as phone, Email, or chat software. If you do contact him by phone or chat, follow up with an Email or posting afterwards stating what you asked and what you believe the answer was. Do not wait for the situation to become unbearable before asking for help or clarification. By asking questions immediately, you may never have problems.

10) Ready, set, go. Maintain an accurate calendar and schedule.
At the start of each course, enter all assignment due dates in your planner. Then, determine how many days you will need to complete each assignment. For instance, if an assignment is due on Thursday that you believe will take three days to complete, mark your planner to work on the assignment on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. Remember to allow time for personal and employment related events. If possible, allow an extra day or two for technology glitches, team members running behind on projects, and other unforeseen delays. Don't forget to set aside time for studying, reviewing, and researching.

Many articles, books, and websites are designed to help class facilitators create lessons, teach classes, and evaluate students in online courses. Few resources are available to help students determine if they should pursue online learning. Even less is available to help students manage an online course successfully. Hopefully, facilitators and students alike can benefit from these 10 tips in managing their online courses more effectively.